Sleeping in Our Crowns

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Sleeping in Our Crowns

by crookedsaint (orphan_account)

Summary

We are slumberous poppies, Lords of Lethe downs,
Some awake and some asleep, Sleeping in our crowns.

Juno Steel, heir to the throne of Brahma, has been kidnapped. The nation is in an uproar. With Prince Benzaiten dead and Sarah Steel locked away in her quarters, who will land on the throne? Hopefully not Minister of Defense Jack Takano, the creator of the Guardian Angel System.

And, of course, definitely not the revolutionaries who kidnapped Juno in the first place. Mag and Peter Ransom may be planning something, but it certainly isn't as innocuous as all that.

Notes

howdy! this fic was written for the 2019-2020 penumbra minibang! the cover art in this chapter is by the lovely shelle, who's @seratlantisite on tumblr. stay tuned for later art by gwen, or @ladyshakesqueer on tumblr!

chapter tws: fictionalized use of drugging, threats of violence, offscreen character death, alcohol mentions, strong language

See the end of the work for more notes

PRINCE BEN KILLED IN FIREFIGHT! EMPRESS GRIEVING!

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Empress Steel withdraws from her duties as ruler after TRAGIC MURDER of Prince Benzaiten last night well after curfew. No regent has yet been named.

In recent weeks, as tensions in Brahma have grown, Empress Steel has cancelled all public appearances and press conferences. In light of yesterday night's assassination of her son, perhaps she is even wiser than we knew. A firefight broke out at approximately eleven P. M. in the royal chambers, leaving behind tattered velvet curtains and singed silk scarves...

“Mag?”

“Yea?”

“What are we gonna do with him when he wakes up?”

“If you dosed him right, he won’t wake up.”
“You mean…”

“That is, until we reach the city limits. He should come to a little after we’re on the ground. Plenty of time to stash him in the safehouse.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Don’t look so down. Remember, kid: rule one of thieving? Keep your head in the moment. I’ve been working on this heist for months. I’ve planned for *everything* .”

“Right.”

“That coming from the guy who hasn’t realized his mark’s been awake for about thirty agonzing seconds,” I grumbled.

Despite the blindfold, I could see I’d struck a nerve. “Peter, hit him with another dose, quick!,” urged the older voice—Mag.

“Uh, no thanks.” I raised my gun to the source of the voice. “I’ve got a splitting headache and, you might notice, a loaded weapon. I’m not about to be packed away in a box and taxidermied for some intergalactic princess collection. I’m not a doll, and I won’t keep still.”

“Practiced that one, have you?” Peter—the one with all the questions—snickered. That’s not good. Laughter means losing control of the room. I had no idea how big my audience was. Anyone smart enough to kidnap a princess could very well be smart enough to hire a smarter, quieter enforcer.

Though, not smart enough to tie me up, or even search me for a weapon. I levelled my gun in Peter’s direction. “I’ve shot blind before. You don’t know that I’ll miss.”

“Oh, but I do.” Just like that, I felt the cool, familiar touch of a blade against my neck.

“How did you—”

“Practice.” The blade tilted upwards, barely digging into the skin of my throat. “And dance lessons. Keeps me light on my feet.”

Dance lessons. *Benzaiten* . I needed to find him. “On second thought, I don’t care. What did you do with my brother?”

There was a silence. And then, Peter was untying my blindfold with light fingers… and a broken expression on his face.

He couldn't have been older than I was. Eighteen, maybe nineteen. High cheekbones, sharp jaw. Sleek hair, tied back in a sensible-yet-elegant braid. Heavy eyebrows, eyes darker than any I'd ever seen, and…

His knife, safely tucked away in his belt. An opening.

I lurched to my feet, pointing my gun right at Peter. "Don't move. Don't—no one move until you tell me where my brother is!"

There was a shuffle of movement further in front of me. Mag, a broad, worn-looking man, stepped out of the shadows cast by the dim fluorescent light. A teenage assassin with a drugged knife and an old man. Was that all the insurgents could muster, these days? "Sit down. You'll make yourself sick. We're on a high-speed transport to the surface, and I don't want you getting your insides all over yourself when we land."

"Tell me," I repeated.

"Mag, can I…?" Peter tentatively stood. Mag just nodded.

He reached out for me. I staggered back. "Don't touch me. Whatever you do, don't come near me. Just tell me where he is. Tell me what happened to him."

"I know a lot about the royal family." Peter's face was creased with what could be focus, or could be worry. "I've done my research. I know you and your brother… are close."

"Damn straight we are. We're twins—hardly ever been apart."

He held out his hands, as if in surrender. "Just know, before I tell you anything, that we would never have a part in what happened to him."

What happened to him. What, exactly, happened to him? "The hell do you mean?"

Peter smiled, his face wan. Looked away from the barrel of my gun and into my eyes. "Benzaiten is dead, Highness. I saw it happen. Believe me, I tried to stop it, but—"

Benzaiten is dead. Benzaiten isn't dead. I was there, I walked into our bedroom, and he was there, and our mother was there… and so was Peter. So was Mag.

"If you laid one *fucking* finger on my brother, *Peter* , you're dead and gone. Tell me right here, *right* now, that you did *everything* you could to save him. Everything! Swear that you—swear, Peter, goddamnit! Everything you could!"

He was still silent, his hands still raised. My gun was shaking.

"Now is not the time for—fuck it, Peter, if you killed him—"

"I didn't kill him."

Finally, an answer. Fine, then. I did my best to shift my aim to Mag.

"Nor did I," he said, his hands now raised in perfect mimic of Peter's. Or maybe it was the other way around. "Believe me. I know it's difficult, and I can't imagine the pain you're in. But please, Highness, believe me when I say that we had no hand in killing your brother. The fog will clear soon, as soon as the sedative we gave you wears off. Trust me. We were in the right place at the wrong time."

In the time it took for Mag to speak, Peter had rested his hand on mine—on the gun. I let him lower my aim. I didn't let him take it from me.

His voice was gentle. "Highness, I have worse news."

"Really? Worse news than my twin brother dying when I was powerless to stop it? Great, sounds like this is going to be a fun afternoon." My voice was shaking now. Great. Great. Everything shaking. Everything.

"I… do know who killed him." Peter's gaze flicked to Mag, before settling again on me.

"Not the time to be vague. Really not." No. None of this had happened. This was a dream, or a sim. It was a test by some sick freak of a god, or by—

"It was the Empress. Your mother."

-

The next time I woke up, it was in a bed with scratchy, stiff sheets. The headache was back, with friends this time. My ribs were sore as they'd ever been, and my skin felt like it was covered in wasps. My throat burned.

As I cracked an eye open, I quickly realized that that was an awful idea. As if the faint music coming from outside wasn't enough to fuel a migraine, the orange light streaming through the open window certainly was. I rolled over and tried to forget everything. Forget this night all over again.

Unfortunately, my body was a pretty persistent reminder. I'd have to get up and face the bullshit one of these days. So I groaned, pulling the blanket tighter around me, and forced my eyes open.

Peter was right there.

His hair was down. He was wearing new clothes—shabbier, simpler than before. He'd just put on cologne—something warm, with a bit of bite to it. There was a bruise on his cheek, and his right eyelid was swollen nearly shut. He had a cup of coffee in his hands. One of those facts was by far the most important.

I snatched the coffee cup out of his hands. It tasted foul, but nothing was going to make this morning—evening?—any worse.

"You're welcome," he muttered.

"Shut up." I sat up, downed as much as I could and set it on the bedside table, which… Well, calling it rustic would be a compliment beyond its wildest dreams. I took care not to knock it off balance as I attempted standing.

I failed. The table lurched to its side as I put my weight on it, and I fell to my knees. The crawling feeling on my skin felt like it was worming its way inside me now, making every square inch of my flesh sting and simmer. I collapsed onto the floor completely, sending Peter backing away.

"Careful. I didn't have time to adjust the dosage"

"Adjust the dosage?"

“Took you out with a short-term memory loss drug combined with a mild sedative.”

“ *Mild?* ”

“Again, I didn’t have time. It’s over-the-counter stuff, technically.” He paused. “Well, the sedative is, anyway. It’ll take a few hours for your liver to process everything.”

Prying my face off the floor took significant effort. “Is that why I currently feel like someone’s trying to escape my skull using nothing but a boxcutter and sheer determination?”

“Yes.” Peter knelt, deftly turning over my wrist to check my pulse. “Your heart rate is accelerating again. You should feel… relatively normal soon.”

“And those memories you mentioned? Do I ever get them back?”

He pursed his lips. “Possibly.”

God, he looked pretentious. Damn the rebels and their so-called ideals. Where in their torturously poetic manifesto does it say that drugging someone and taking their memories is fine, really, so long as it’s to kidnap them and get away with invading their home?

I put on my best imperial-decree voice. “Take me back to the palace. I have to be there in time for…” For what?

Right. For the funeral.

Right.

“Like I said, maybe. It’s going to take a few hours for you to be completely legally lucid. I hit you with enough for someone twice your size.” He grabbed me by the shoulder and pulled me up with him. “On your feet, Highness. Eat something, and we’ll deal with any more black eyes you want to give me once you have a full stomach and full context.”

I let him help me down a set of creaky stairs and into a kitchen, tiled in pale green with walls papered with peeling florals. Not the kind of delicate, detailed florals you’d find me wearing—more the kind you get in botanical journals, and so on. I sat myself down as Peter opened the fridge and started pulling out all sorts of food I’d never seen before, much less eaten. I turned back to the rest of the

kitchen and let “strange food” fall to the bottom of my list of “things upsetting me right now.”

The wallpaper had a familiar quality to it. Sasha had this book with all sorts of poisonous flowers in it, growing up. We’d pore over the pages as she quizzed me and Ben on antidotes and concentrations and —

“Venusian wild poppy, huh?”

“What?” He turned sharply, narrowly ducking a hanging pan. “I mean, yes. How did you know?”

“Princess, remember? People try to kill me all the time.” I sighed. “Short-term memory loss, like you said. No known antidote, but it should wear off within an hour or so. Even less if I eat and drink properly.”

Peter looked up from some eggy-smelling concoction he was whisking and quirked an eyebrow. “The catch?”

“People don’t tend to recover much from the time they were drugged. Even if they do, everything stays pretty fuzzy unless they’ve got a well-paid hypnotist to drag them out of it. It’s normally used for stealing priceless items from idiot nobles who don’t check their food before eating it. The sedated marks are suggestible enough to give up the hiding places of anything they own, and they can’t tell the police anything about who drugged them.”

He grinned. “Now, why would anyone do something like that?”

Soon enough, breakfast was served. Apparently, the strange egg concoction was an “omelette,” though I didn’t see him crack any actual eggs. He just mixed together some yellow powder and water and stuck it in a pan. But, regardless of the process, it was food, and I needed a lot of it if I was going to work the Venusian poppy—and last night’s alcohol—out of my system. Plus, it gave me time to work through what I knew.

Ben was dead. I was somewhere on the surface in the company of two probably-assassins who *didn’t* kill my brother. And my mother…

That was the only piece of this godforsaken puzzle that made any sense. Mom hated me. I knew staying out late would piss her off. Even more so, I knew that someday she’d realize where all her money had been going. I had just hoped she’d been sober enough to tell the

difference between her own kids when she found out.

So that was the solution. Ben was dead. Sarah Steel did it. It was my fault.

Case closed.

ONE HEIR DEAD, THE OTHER MISSING?

Chapter Summary

Sara Steel cannot be reached for comment. The rest of Brahma can, but no one's asking them.

Chapter Notes

see end notes for chapter tws, and feel free to tell me if i should add anything. enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ONE HEIR DEAD, THE OTHER MISSING?

Whereabouts of CROWN PRINCESS JUNO still UNKNOWN! Her Imperial Majesty REFUSES TO COMMENT!

The same night of Prince Ben's murder, Princess Juno vanished into the night. Adviser Jack Takano suggests foul play from the insurgents, while Duke Popov suspects court politics to be the culprit. Whoever committed this atrocity, they're responsible for the complete silence of Her Imperial Majesty…

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As soon as my legs started complying when I asked them to stand, I knew where I needed to go.

"Absolutely not," Mag scoffed.

"You'd be putting yourself in danger." Peter turned away from the sink to glare at me. "We went to a lot of trouble to get you out of there."

"You think I don't know the danger I'm in? I'm not fragile. I trained for times like this. If I want to go back to the palace, I will. My mother __"

"I'm not referring to rebels or assassins." Peter set down the last dirty dish and joined us at the table. "You're a jewel in the empire's

crown, Juno. Every noble is going to want to play the bold rescuer, and once they have you, they won't let you go."

"Neither will either of you, it seems," I grumbled.

Peter rolled his eyes.

"Rule one of thieving, Pete," Mag said. "Never get cocky with a mark."

"So I'm a mark, now? Sorry, I thought I was a hostage." I raised my hands in mock-surrender. "What do you want? Gold? Jewels? You took my gun while I slept, but not my rings. It's not money you're after, is it?"

"What will it take to make you believe that getting you out of there was necessary?" hissed Peter. "That it was for your own good?"

"Explain to me why you were in the palace in the first place."

"Irrelevant." Mag stood, stretching. "You *kids* can argue as much as you want. The first order of business today is to put Juno in some sensible clothes. The dress you're wearing might have been on the cover of Galaxy's Hottest last week, but if you're not careful, it'll end up soaked in blood in a dark alley tonight."

"I can't tell if that's a threat, or if you just didn't think that sentence through to the end."

Peter frowned. "We're taking him out?"

"Not until he can blend in. Lend him something of yours, then go to the market and find one or two things that fit. I'll be out all day getting provisions for three." Mag shot me a condescending smile. "Tell me, Highness, is freeze-dried pigeon refined enough for your tastes?"

I wasn't about to take that bait. "So I'm stuck here playing makeover with your, what, apprentice? Nephew? Then, once I'm sufficiently embarrassed, I get to go out in public with him and run *errands* ?"

"Exactly. I'll be back by curfew. Don't stand next to any windows while I'm gone."

And with that, he left.

I stared at Peter. “Is he this vague when it’s just the two of you, or am I special?”

He just smiled. “Rule one of thieving: even if you’re after the royal jewels, don’t think about the queen. Think only about the one guard that holds the key—and how you’re going to get your hand in his pocket. In other words, Mag doesn’t have to tell me every little thing. I trust him to plan the job, and he trusts me to do it right.”

I propped chin up on my hands. “How smug. Do you practice that one?”

“Shut up. You need to go get changed.”

“And you need to be taken down a peg. Here, go get me something to wear. I’ll insult your taste, and then that’s everything on our to do list for today!”

-

I had forgotten about the errands.

It was your average summer day on Brahma: sunny, bone-dry, with spices and song drifting in the air. It wasn’t too different from New Kinshasa’s own street markets—though, I had to admit, there was a significantly different clientele.

You had your parents, handling more children than I’d ever seen in one place. You had your constables, lurking in dark corners instead of keeping to patrol routes. You had your street rats, arguing with the baker over fair value for a single loaf of bread. One of them held out a handful of creds and what looked like a nearly-rusted-through plasma cutter, while the other offered a shoe and what sounded like a lengthy set of services. Most familiar to me, though, were the Outer Rim soldiers away on leave, jackets draped over their shoulders even in the heat just so you could see their honors. Beside them, locals fawned, chattering on about the war and the rising cost of ammunition and the best coffeehouses around here. But before I could take in the rest of the crowd—or, for that matter, where I might get a better breakfast—I spotted one of those locals slipping a hand into the pocket of an admiral.

And just like that, one of the constables stirred into action, grabbing the would-be thief by the wrist and yanking them out into the center of the street. No one seemed… surprised. Not even Peter. They all went about their daily business as a crack like thunder struck the air, a shock of blue light piercing the thief clean through the chest. The hairs on the back of my neck bristled as they crumpled forward.

I couldn't help but watch as the constable cleared them away, as the admiral kept *chatting* —as if nothing ever happened.

I didn't realize I'd been standing stock-still until Peter caught me by the shoulder. "Keep walking. You're standing out." He sounded… chipper. Sing-song. As if this happens every day. "And for your own sake, stop standing so straight. Even if they don't recognize your face, they're going to catch you for that royal *goddamn* bearing of yours."

By then, he was well ahead of me, his voice a drifting, teasing cry on the wind. I pushed my way through the crowd to get back to his side. "What was that?"

"What?" He cocked his head. Still so casual. Still so *light*.

"That wasn't a stun laser. I've stunned people before. They don't just… collapse. If your gun's in working order, they fall straight backwards with eyes still open."

"Thank you for passing on the *vital* knowledge of the royal shooting instructor, Highness, but I'm afraid I knew all that. Your point is?"

"Can you take this seriously for one second?" I growled. "It's all well and good to keep your chin up and all, but we just saw a man die for a handful of loose creds."

It was Peter's turn to stop. He pulled me between two stalls, grip tight on my wrists. His expression shifted in an instant, narrowing to a sharp point. "What did you think the Guardian Angel System was?"

The Guardian Angel System. An innovation in security for the people of Brahma, and for the Outer Rim as a whole. Sold to my mother by one Jack Takano, combination local dignitary from a neighboring asteroid and occasional babysitter for me and Ben. He made an impressive case: stunning criminals in the act means no disruptively hot pursuit, no expensive collateral damage, and no vigilantes interrupting important police business. If they tried to intervene, we'd just stun them, too, no harm done and a lovely night's sleep at the nearest clinic.

I gave him the standard line. “It’s supposed to be a way of catching minor crime before it escalates. I’ve heard it’s mostly used to secure rioters before they start breaking windows and setting things on fire. Or catching thieves before they can run. That kind of thing.”

Peter shook his head, a bitter smile spreading across his face. “Oh, Highness. How do they expect you to stay alive if they keep lying to you? Trapped up there in your floating palace. Head in the clouds.” He jerked me past the stalls, into a dark, grimy alley. Tired-looking wooden boards blocked out most of the sunlight, and anything electrical looked like it had been busted out with a baseball bat. We kept walking, albeit with a little less dragging and a little more of my feet remembering how to stay steady. “The Guardian Angel System delivers a swift and convenient death to anyone who dares disrespect New Kinshasa’s authority.” He caught my eye, gaze cold as steel. “Your *mother’s* authority. There’s a few places—” he waves a hand, gesturing to the alley— “without any cameras, that the constables can be paid off not to check. But aside from that, all but a few havens on Brahma are ‘protected’ by the impending threat of senseless murder.”

What could I say to that? My feet kept moving, independent of my brain. “That’s awful.”

“That’s why there’s—what do they call it, up there? An insurgency?” Peter’s smile twisted into something prouder, something more open. “At least they give us *some* credit.”

All those times I’d tried to talk Sasha and Mick into sneaking me down to the surface. It wasn’t all just a lightshow, something to stare at from the edge while the drugs made everything glow even brighter. It wasn’t even the security theatre I thought it was when I was sober. They could have died, and it would have been my fault. What’s worse, they never told me. They grew up here, and even after their parents managed to get them out of this hellhole, they lived the rest of their lives thinking their best friend either didn’t know or didn’t *care* that their childhood had been built on a foundation of—

“We’re here.”

The light of day made its unwelcome return to searing the insides of my eyeballs while Peter led me into what must be the garment district. The air was thick with the scent of tanneries and dye shops, an exquisite mixture of aromas like turmeric and saffron and curing megaheifer. As it all rolls over me, I’m reminded of why I stopped tagging along with Ben to go shopping. That, and he always

complained about things I didn't understand. This or that color or pattern and the season it belongs in and so on.

But that didn't matter anymore.

Peter's mood shifted instantly as he gabbed to merchants about the weather, the price of linen, how I'm new in town. I tuned out instantly —or, at least, I tried to. Soon enough, though, he had his arm linked through mine and I was being poked and prodded by a whole family of merchants. It's not like I wasn't *used* to playing ornamental, but you could at least warn a lady.

"So, is this the new boyfriend, Ransom?" cooed one of the merchants. She was a scrappy-looking pre-teen with a headscarf so brightly-dyed it almost hurt to look at. "Pretty easy on the eyes."

To my credit, I didn't flinch. I was too busy filing away the last name and running it against what little news I read. It sounded fake, but I wasn't about to believe he was maintaining multiple criminal aliases.

Peter always had to be one step ahead, though—he just laughed. "I only said he was from out of town, darling. I can have visitors who aren't necessarily *gentleman* visitors."

The girl pursed her lips, her tone matter-of fact. "Well, of course not. This one's a lady."

An older woman leaned over her table, peering at me through half-moon glasses. "He looks rich."

"I'm right here, you know," I snapped.

About a half dozen pairs of eyes swept to look at me, assessing me. Me, in my ill-fitting clothes. Me, staggering about like a drunk. Me, who was just very, very rude to who it occurs to me now must be the family matriarch.

At the last second, I managed a cocky grin. "I mean, uh, if you *really* want to know. You could ask me? You know how *Ransom* is about his personal life."

Immediately, I was bombarded with questions—and in turn with intense regret that I'd said anything at all.

"So you're together, then?"

“Where do you work? What do you make?”

“Are you two being, you know, safe?”

“Does he buy you nice things?”

“Is he good to you? He’d better be, you having a face like that.”

“How does he get his braid so neat? Ever seen him do it?”

“Does he really wear a knife to bed?”

Fortunately, before I actually had to answer anything, Peter stepped in. “Now, now. He’s just looking to buy some new clothes. That’s all. If any of you have questions for him, they’d better be about his measurements.”

And so it went. Somewhere in the bustling of tape measures and example garments and so, so many coathangers, Peter grabbed my hand again. I shot him a look.

He leaned in. “Just play along. We’ll have what we need in a moment.” His lips brushed the curve of my ear with every word. I decided not to think about it.

As they stacked bags of used clothing in Peter’s arms, I searched the nearby tables for some distraction. Anything to get me out of more questions—or, judging by the looks some of the older women were giving me, some kind of a shovel talk. I found something worth my attention two stalls down: a newspaper stand. I scanned the headlines:

REBEL CELL CRUSHED IN FALAHI: MILITARY SAYS “MORE COMING”

SEARCH FOR PRINCESS ON NEW KINSHASA COMES UP EMPTY!

ROYAL FUNERAL HELD WITHIN PALACE WALLS “FOR SAFETY”

BREAD RIOTS EXPLODE IN NEW SOUTH BANGALORE!

MURDER OF PRINCE BEN MEANS TIGHTER PALACE SECURITY, SAYS OFFICER

GRIEVING EMPRESS APPOINTS TAKANO AS INTERIM

"Takano? Of all people?"

The man minding the booth snorted. "Tell me about it. Man's a political time bomb. Someday he's gonna snap, and we're all getting shot down in our boots."

I blinked. "Yeah. Uh, I hear he's planning improvements to the Angel."

"Improvements. Yeah, whatever he wants to call 'em. Ask me, he should be in prison for even letting the Empress build the damn thing."

"You're just gonna…" I flicked my gaze back and forth, looking through the square for any constables.

"Psh. If they were gonna strike me down for just talkin', then they'd have no citizens left. Better to let us let out steam, eh?"

I could tell he was waiting for an answer, but Peter caught my eye. He jerked his head back to the alley we came through. I made a not-so-gracious "someone's-waving-at-me" exit and wandered over.

"Geez, you know I'm not staying *that* long, right?" I nodded to the various parcels and bags draped on every available limb.

"Couldn't stop them." He snickered. "They seem to want you around for a long, *long* time."

"It's nice that they approve."

A gunshot went off above my head. Peter tugged me back into the alley by the arm, sacrificing a bag now spilling over with colorful sundresses. The square erupted in sound, with several loudspeakers all talking over each other, telling everyone to calm down. It had the opposite effect. Several of the voices crackled out as more gunshots rang out.

"Got any idea what's going on, Peter?"

"If I knew I'd be telling you, Highness!" Tugging me onto the dirty ground, he grabbed a heavy, if shabby-looking, trench coat from the back, throwing it over the both of us. "Now shut up, stay down, and

stop moving. Sounds like there's trouble, and I don't want to run out blind into another main street when there could be Royal Guard out recording faces and taking down names."

"There's Royal Guard everywhere!" I hissed. Still, though, when in Brahma, do as the Brahmese do. If an established criminal tells you how not to get shot at in a riot, you listen.

And that's what it was: a riot. The shots had only multiplied as both laser and older gunpowder weapons fired at each other. Even over the shouting, I could make out the unmistakable *whoosh* of a power cannon—a sound I hadn't heard since me and Ben's last birthday, when the parade came through.

The noise rose like the tide. I did my best not to get swept back into the wave of memories it brought with it, but, try as I might, I always sink.

Drumming, cheering, the scent of lilac thick in the air. My shoulders shook. *My mother, looking down her nose at me, as if disappointed I'd survived to nineteen.* The shouts only got louder, more frantic. *Confetti, glittering on the ground.* The wool of the coat was wet against my face. *Ben, smiling in the sunlight.*

Peter placed a hand on my back, and I froze. My throat was raw. My lungs, tight. I locked eyes with him—with that *look* he gave me back on the transport. The look like broken glass. Like someone had taken his heart in both hands and squeezed.

"Highness, are you—"

Before he could continue, a voice sounded over the din, drowning us out—his reassurances and my sobs. " *Tell me, citizens of Brahma: where are the funerals for the common people? Why does the Prince get flowers on every street corner, when my mother got nothing? Why does the Prince get banquets in his honor, when your sister got nothing? Tell me, Brahma, where are the funerals?* "

A cheer erupts, punctuated by the screech of a megaphone. Louder, this time, the voice continues: " *Why does the Prince get a parade down the length of New Kinshasa, when your child got nothing? Why do the newspapers call the death of one a tragedy, and the deaths of many a rebellion? Why are we kept under lock and key when the Princess roams free of his birdcage whenever he pleases? Why are we, the people, not hunted for when we are lost? Why are our children not mourned when a stolen piece of bread leaves them dead in the street? Why are we hungry,*

when they choke on their own corru— ”

The crack of lightning through the air was no less startling now than before. This time, it felt as if every hair on my body stood up. Worse, though, than the thunderclap... were the soft thuds as bodies hit the ground.

Peter’s voice was gentle in my ear. “Now is where we run.”

Didn’t need to tell me twice.

-

“So, the kid’s got his dose of the local culture now, huh?”

Peter paced the length of what could kindly be called the sitting room. “It’s getting worse, Mag. They didn’t just kill the speaker. Half of everyone in the square was eliminated—and, according to the radio, all on account of possessing firearms.”

“That’s a crime?” I frowned, sinking deeper into the couch. “No, that’s definitely not a crime. Half of everyone on New Kinshasa keeps at least a *polite* sidearm on them.”

“Exactly,” said Mag. He was resting on a wooden armchair, a mug of what he claimed to be coffee in his hand. Judging by the cup I’d had this morning, it was more like vaguely-bean-flavored powdered milk and water. “Like Pete said, things are getting worse, and *fast*. Now, Highness, you’re going to stay home while he and I get a little something I need for our next move. Don’t even think about trying to catch a transport to that funeral, since you don’t legally exist as anyone other than the Princess.”

I opened my mouth, and closed it again. “You figured that out, huh?”

“That and more, Highness. That and more.”

Before I could wipe that smug look off Mag’s face, Peter interceded. “If I may, Mag?” He levelled that cool stare at me. Behind it, though, was a gentleness I hadn’t seen before. “This is, to put it lightly, a rather delicate matter for the princess. Best not to make light of it if

we want him to keep upright and functional. He hasn't been subject to —"

A fire lit in Mag's eyes. "He hasn't known half of what you or I have been through, Pete. There's nothing stopping him from running away to the constables and getting us run through by a bolt of electricity whenever he feels like it." Even as I turned away, I could feel him looking at me. "Except, of course, the small matter that his twin brother is dead and his mother's a murderess who'd probably off him, too. Best not to let him forget, huh?"

Peter carefully smoothed out his expression before continuing. "I don't think he would forget something like that easily. Best to go a little easier on him."

Mag opened his mouth, ready to launch into another oh-so-witty tirade. I watched with care as he closed it again. Took a sip of coffee. And with that, Peter slumped, all the tension gone from his muscles.

I recognized that. Couldn't miss it in a million years, no matter how much else I repressed or forgot or went over in therapy. It was the same way I felt every time Ben was able to talk Mom down from one of her tantrums. Every time she walked past the curtain I was hidden behind, too drunk to listen—or maybe just too drunk to care.

"Sure," said Mag. "Besides, I'll never know the *real* trauma of growing up rich and powerful." With that, he smacked his mug down on the table and rose, stretching. The man was made of nothing but muscle: the rough, wiry kind you get from lifting crates and barrels, not dumbells. My hindbrain kindly informed me, all too late, that this was a man who could crush me if he wanted to, no matter how harmless he looked. "Pete, I'll need you tonight."

"What for?"

"Our next move, remember?"

I watched carefully as Peter's shoulders tensed. For a guy so good at slipping on expressions like a mask, he was a godawful physical actor. "And leave the princess alone?"

Just when a lady figures it's safe to sink back into the sofa, Peter Ransom's gotta throw a curveball. Thankfully, I was damn good at catching them. "Hey, maybe I want to stay home. I've had a long day."

“Long day?” Mag spat. I understood Peter’s coiled-spring demeanor now. There was something behind his usual affable manner, this burning hatred, that, once I spotted it, I knew I’d never forget. “What, you go clothes shopping, evade getting caught in any riots or arrests, and you call that a long day? Hell, you were home before curfew!”

“Mag, I have a suggestion to make.” Peter had stopped pacing. He looked… solid, standing straight and still. He held his hands folded behind his back. The knuckles were white. “If I may.”

He waved a hand in response.

“No,” said Peter. “I mean. If. I. May?” He jerked his head towards the kitchen.

“Fine, fine.” Mag followed, feet dragging along the floor.

If they thought I was about to politely tune them out like a good little princess, they were wrong—plus, even with the door shut, the walls were too damn thin for me to try. I made out a few words. “In danger” featured prominently in Peter’s vocabulary. “Open windows, remember?” Meanwhile, Mag cut in with a few words about “resource management” and “goddamnit, Pete, who else is going to help me.”

“Why don’t you take both of us? He’s not a fool, Mag. He’s been shaking like a leaf ever since he saw that poor pickpocket—”

“What, and that makes him a revolutionary? He’s just feeling guilty for the first time in his life.”

“First rule of of thieving! You and I both know that guilt is the foundation of *any* moral code, good or evil.”

“Hey, you don’t get to use that on *me* —

“At the very least, revolutionary or no, he’s finally feeling guilty about the right things! With the kind of drive he has—”

“So you know him that well, eh? You two have a little heart to heart?”

“Mag, I don’t want to leave him *alone!* ”

Silence. Then, they fell back into hushed tones.

“...nothing special…”

“...saw him up there, a savage with a pistol…”

“...still a liability…”

“...that face, Mag, I don’t…”

And just like that, the door swung open. And I, Princess Juno Steel, was out to commit some corporate larceny.

Chapter End Notes

chapter tws: police violence, rioting (not described in detail), gun violence (not described in detail), implied past parental abuse

MINISTER TAKANO ON RIOTS: “BRAHMA NEEDS A DOSE OF PREVENTATIVE MEDICINE”

Chapter Summary

The larceny begins.

Chapter Notes

short one today, folks! chapter tws in the end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

MINISTER TAKANO ON RIOTS: “BRAHMA NEEDS A DOSE OF PREVENTATIVE MEDICINE”

Jack Takano, our newly appointed Interim Minister and Director of Defense, welcomed reporters into the palace this morning for a cup of tea and an interview. His eyes shone with hope for the Brahma’s health, yet behind them, there was an unmistakable determination...

-

The plan, as I knew it:

First, they returned my gun. I was supposed to have Peter’s back in any confrontation he didn’t manage to slip away from. Besides, it was apparently Mag’s policy to have at least one loud and flashy weapon per heist, just in case there was a daring escape in need of cover fire.

Peter and I would load up a ground transport with dry goods. Mag would drive the transport, with the two of us hidden within a stack of wool blankets. We’d slip away as soon as he stopped, preparing to flank his entrance into the warehouse from the side doorway. Mag would maneuver his way into the storage while we stood guard. Once he was out, he’d meet us in the alley outside with his prize in tow.

Problem was, neither of the thieves seemed inclined to tell me what I was helping them steal. Mag was just as affably opaque as always,

and as for Peter, I could never be sure he knew in the first place. He could just be blustering for Mag's benefit.

It wasn't like I was opposed to breaking the law all of a sudden. In fact, yesterday's riot had… encouraged my lawbreaking spirit, if you please. But Mag's plan felt bigger than that. Maybe I was just falling for his illusions of grandeur. Maybe he had something nasty in store for me—or, for that matter, Peter.

Or Brahma.

But I had no choice. So I followed Mag's orders to the letter, even though the wool itched and Peter was less-than-pleasant company. His eyes kept flicking to my gun, then my face, then out the back of the transport.

A skid sounded, dampened by the stacks of carpet beneath us. We ground to a halt. Mag's voice echoed from somewhere in the cab. Gravel crunched underfoot. Another man said something that, while I couldn't make out the words, was definitely rude. The cab door opened. There was a thud.

Then all hell broke loose.

I could barely hear Peter over the commotion. "That's our cue."

I followed him out of the transport, gun primed. The warehouse was even larger than I'd expected. Its sloped, windowed roof towered over the rest of the block, and the bay doors Mag had since disappeared into yawned like the entrance to a cavern I'd never find my way out of.

Thankfully, we were bolting for a set of double doors down the alleyway. More of that gravel crunched underfoot—we weren't making the silent entrance I had anticipated from a gang of master thieves.

Peter tried the handle. Locked. He reached into his jacket, rooted through an inside pocket, and pulled out a set of lockpicks. He met my gaze for the first time all night and nodded.

I turned my back to him and checked my gun. I had it set to stun, which wasn't part of the plan, but it would let me cover Peter without trying to decide if tonight would be the night I killed a man. Figure it's a net good.

A small, metallic click sounded behind me. At the edge of my vision, Peter slipped in the door. I followed, back to the warehouse in case we had anyone following.

A sharp intake of breath. Peter pressed up against my back. “Not alone,” he hissed.

“Well, yeah, I figured. Given the racket Mag was making.” I didn’t bother to whisper. I’d already let the door fall shut behind me, and the *clunk* it made could have raised the dead.

Peter’s breath quickened. I got the sense he was as blind as I was in the darkness. The only light I could make out was the diffuse glow of the streetlights, filtered through the dusty windows overhead. With that, I could barely make out stacks of small packages. They were wrapped in paper, maybe, and if I was judging the distance right, you could fit about three in one armful before it’d get cumbersome.

The rise and fall of Peter’s chest halted. I let my eyes flick over the scene. Nothing had changed, to my eyes.

Wait. Mag, over by the stacks of product. He shoveled several into a sack with a series of small *clink* ing sounds.

And Peter had been right. He wasn’t alone. Rather, he was conversing quietly with a man I’d recognize anywhere.

“Really, Ransom, I don’t see the need for more so soon,” said Jack Takano, newly appointed minister of Brahma and grade-A asshole bent on undermining my family and driving my mother further into her madness at any and all costs.

“I don’t *see the need* for you to cut me off so soon. I still have work to do, Ramses.” Mag circled him, gun pointed clean at Takano’s left shoulder. “We’re on the same side, here. The royals need to be brought down. Need I remind you that, at the end of all things, there’s no need for you to be the one sitting on the throne. Or rather, at the democratically elected desk.”

“Au contraire.” Takano was holding himself with the same arrogant posture as he put on in court. Here, in this dim, dusty warehouse. He hadn’t changed a bit since he last tried to bust me and mine—Sasha, Mick, and I had been coming back in through the kitchens, and he spotted us. Decided to play judge, jury, and executioner then and there. Let us off with a “warning,” which constituted a dislocated elbow for Mick. Did the whole thing without so much as slouching.

Slouching was for peasantry, I guess. Abuse and manipulation? Now those are gentlemanly hobbies.

And it was times like this when I wish I could tell Peter all of this without any interruption. It'd also help, of course, if Takano wouldn't notice. As it was, I elbowed him.

"I think you know exactly why I'm going to end up at the top of this country. It's simple, Ransom: I'm the best at what I do. Send anyone to replace Sarah and her whelps, and I'll dispatch of them with someone just. Like. You."

To his credit, Peter only flinched. He looked at me, opening his mouth to chastise me—

"Ramses. You know there's no one like me." A breath in. A breath out. The gun's aim, swiveling to point at the spot right between Takano's eyes. "There's no one better, and no one more discreet. So give. Me. The shipment."

"Takano," I mouthed. "Big shot." I slowed down, making sure he got my meaning. "Ass. Hole."

He gave a perfunctory nod before jerking his head towards Mag.

"Asshole?" I shrugged my shoulders, exaggerating the gesture into something approaching pantomime.

"You misunderstand me."

Bad timing on my part. Takano had clearly expected some kind of foul play from Mag—and I didn't blame the guy, after the squealing I heard from the fellows outside. We'd been spotted by some unfortunate goon, and before I knew it, there was laser fire whizzing over both my shoulders.

"If I want something," Takano crowed, "I get it!"

Peter's shoulders left their stable contact with mine as he pivoted, knives flying from a sheath I certainly hadn't spotted. I shuddered, wondering what else he had in his pockets.

It was a second too long to wait. One of Takano's men tackled me to the ground, syringe in hand. I tucked in my legs, pushing myself to the side with my unpinned arm, and rolled, flipping the guy over with a hollow thud. Figuring it was the fastest way, I smashed the syringe

—still in his hand—with the butt of my gun. In retrospect, I should have anticipated the eyeful of broken glass. Note to self: wear safety goggles next time.

The goon managed to wrest himself from under me and bolt for the exit. Peter and Mag had already mowed down countless others. I seemed to have had the only sensible adversary—not to mention the only sober-looking one. The rest of the tough customers in the warehouse didn't look so tough. Peter hit one approaching from behind with upside-down, over-the-shoulder laser fire. A child could have dodged that shot, and yet…

And yet…

My world went dark and fuzzy around the edges. Or maybe it already had been, and the warehouse was just too dark and fuzzy to tell. My head felt like it was upside-down and over my shoulder, like my whole body was a little to the left, like…

"Highness!" cried Peter and Takano, at once.

Peter got there first. I think I sighed when he did. Nothing was quite right, nothing totally memorable, and yet. "Juno. *Juno* , are you alright?"

The sound of his voice. His hands, one behind my head, the other under my knees. He lifted me, I think. Or maybe I started floating just from that gentle touch. "Peter, I—"

"So, Highness." Takano sneered. I couldn't make out his face. Was I looking at him at all? "They've swayed you already."

Peter must have answered for me. I couldn't hear him—only the rumble of his chest told me anything was happening at all. My head swam with a thousand sensations at once, and then clarified painfully back into Takano's voice.

"I'd never think you'd work willingly with a bunch of murderers and thieves." The room tilted. Right, left. Right, left. Then just right. Everything was too close—no, too far. "It's beneath you, really."

"Drug dealing seems beneath the likes of you, *Ramses* ," spat Peter.

Peter. Peter was too close. No, too far. I curled into him, pressing my bloodied eye into his chest.

“In the name of restoring this kingdom to order? Please. How could that be beneath me, Ransom?” His tone darkened. “Me, the future ruler of this slum? Really, do you blame me for wanting to put a bit of a shine on it before it’s gifted back to me?”

The room spun. I twisted my eyes shut. A pain—a *searing, aching* pain spread from the right side of my face all the way down my spinal column.

And then it was dark.

Chapter End Notes

chapter tws: gun violence, drug dealing, mentions of past non-sexual physical abuse from a trusted adult, extremely dirty politics, canon-typical detailed eye gore, and descriptions of vertigo/passing out. if you want to skip the abuse mentions, stop reading at "Au contraire" and skip that whole paragraph. it picks up again at "And it was times like this..."

stay safe!

DRUG WAREHOUSE DISCOVERED IN NEW KINSHASA'S SHADOW!?

Chapter Summary

Juno wakes up. Juno wakes up. Juno wakes up.

Chapter Notes

see endnotes for chapter tws!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

DRUG WAREHOUSE DISCOVERED IN NEW KINSHASA'S SHADOW!?

Directly under the Angel's orbit today was the city of New Mokba, a known terrorist hub and host to all manner of shady characters. As you all well know, there's been a surge in Venusian Poppy sales lately… and just yesterday, over five hundred and twelve syringes full of the stuff was found downtown! Read on, folks: as Kinshasa Weekly's best and newest investigative reporter, I, Rita, am on the case!

-

When I woke, there was music coming from outside my window. Acoustic guitar, and a person's voice so soft I could barely make it out.I lay there, eyes closed, for hours or maybe minutes. My head felt like a cloud. My stomach felt just as terrible as it did my first night here.

My mind… was drifting. I'd dreamed about a story Mom used to tell, when Benten and I were still too small to threaten the throne. When we were her kids. It was about the monster who lived under the palace, and the wizard who put it there. Magic words that would fix anything, even if she wasn't around anymore…

"Mag, I didn't think—"

"I don't care what you think!" The roar of Mag's voice chased every thought from my head but *run.* I sprang out of bed—or I tried to. My

muscles seized and pinched all over and, as soon as I was vaguely vertical, every bone in my body informed me kindly that it was time to lie down again.

"Pete, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell. You know your input is important to me. It's just that this job? Brahma's fate hangs in the balance. Without a little blood on my hands, I'd have to bear the weight of thousands of Brahmese citizens, dead. Dead just because we refused to give them a chance."

His words were honey-soft. As if that could fool me, or Peter.

"I'm sorry, Mag, I just don't think—"

"You really don't, Pete. You never do. Do you think if there were another way, I wouldn't have found it? Only, what, ten people? And all drug dealers! I promise, Peter, it'll all be worth it. Listen to me: it's always worth it."

-

"Ben?"

The hallway stretched on and on. My footsteps tread the same paths they had a million times before. No one was there. No one behind me, either. Just… silence.

"Ben, if if this is some kind of a joke, I'm going to throttle you myself."

I slipped into a servant corridor. Up some stairs. Down some. Avoiding passing Mom's room was more of a habit than anything else, these days. She could barely get out of bed these days, and besides, it's not like I was ever home.

Or, I was home. I was just never at the palace.

"Ben, are you in bed already? God, you suck-up. It's not like anyone's even coming to the parade tomorrow. Pretty much everyone hates us right now, anyway… "

Oh.

Oh, n—

-

I woke to new sounds in the square outside. It was lunch hour, with hollers and catcalls ringing out above the sounds of accordion, or maybe concertina—I'd never bothered to learn the difference. My limbs were finally obeying my commands again, and I relished in stretching out from the net of sheets I'd woven for myself.

Then the door cracked open.

"Still asleep, Highness?" said Mag. "I hope you're good and tired, because we're not going to be able to hit you with the good stuff again until tonight. Takano's being fussy with the supply chain, as you know, and we need you all dressed for the show."

Morals told me to leap out of bed and deck him for that. Experience told me to shut up.

He took a few steps into the room before setting about pacing at the foot of my bed. "I still can't believe he *let* me kill all those guards. Unreasonable, really, wasting people like that." The heels of his shoes clicked their way to my bedside. He was breathing far too close for comfort. "I'd never let anyone touch Pete. And you, of course, well. I need you, don't I? The blood of a royal is the Angel's real weakness. The amount of effort I put into milking Takano for that information alone would make you worth keeping.

"But that's not enough. You alone aren't enough. I need to rewrite Brahma's mythology. I need a sacrifice. It couldn't have been your mother, of course. The loss of the Empress would be cause to celebrate. Oh, and not your brother. Never him. He simply didn't have the same… flair for tragedy. No, I needed a tortured hero to really sell it. Someone to stumble into the palace's deepest secrets, die on the knife of a Minister, and bring the whole thing crashing down."

He chuckled somewhere deep in the pit of his throat. "Literally."

The rustle of a sleeve. Something cold smeared across my eye. Searing pain cutting through the wound, bringing a spasm with it as a plus-one.

"This should do for now. Sleep tight, princess, and don't concern

yourself with the pain. All that and more will fade as soon as I can get that *bastard* Ramses back on my side.

" *Our* side."

-

"Oh, Juno, don't cry, baby. Here, Benten, come over here. It's time for bed. One more story, and then bed.

"There once was a little kingdom ruled by a little family who loved each other very, very much. All of their subjects loved them, too, because they were good and just rulers. The Queen was kind and smart, and the children would grow up to be just like her. Everyone loved them, except for one.

"There was a terrible monster who lived underneath their floating palace. It snarled and bit anyone it saw try to be kind or help a friend. It had big, sharp teeth, and long, smelly claws, and its fur was red and shaggy. Some say it wasn't born, but made by a wizard to protect the Queen from her bad dreams. He forgot one thing, though, when he made it. He didn't give it any love. Instead, he locked it up in a cage and taught it how to snarl and growl and look big.

"When he gave it to the Queen, she was terrified, insisting this wasn't what she had wanted at all. She sent it away, and her dreams got worse and worse. But the monster had already been made, and no one wanted to get close enough to kill it.

"But the wizard felt terrible for what he had done to the Queen. She didn't sleep at all, anymore. She was too afraid that the monster would come and eat her and her children. So he gave them all a special spell to say, for when they found themselves in terrible danger…"

-

The next time I woke up, the music was gone.

I opened my eyes.

I opened my *eye*.

Peter Ransom, at the window. Staring down at me. He leaned on it with the grace of a birch tree bowed by the wind, one hand at his chin, the other folded over a bandage on his opposite shoulder. On the one hand, I watched him kill some ten people last night. On the other, I had come to realize he was the most beautiful man I'd ever met. Outlined by the afternoon light like that, he looked… angelic.

"Hey, Peter."

"Highness!" He straightened, the soft expression on his face tightening. "Do you need any—water, coffee, anything? Something?"

I chuckled. It came out more like a dry rasp. "Don't think that'd help the whole…" I waved my hand at the right half of my face. "Would it?"

He frowned. It somehow didn't spoil the view. "Might help that voice of yours. Here, I'll get your…"

"My what?"

"Your… dinner." He stared at me, unmoving. Peter Ransom, a picture of stillness. It felt wrong, somehow, like his body was meant to stay moving, to never rest. It's like seeing a hummingbird sit down for a breather.

"You're very clearly not fetching my dinner."

"I'm not."

A moment, as I stared back at him. That sensation of too-close-too-far didn't seem willing to leave on its own. I was miles away from him. At the same time, I could still feel my head tucked in the crook of his elbow, his arms cradling me like I was something precious.

Not fragile, though. Never felt fragile, with him.

"Tell me about the night Ben died."

That seemed to cut the tension in the air. He sighed, dropping his shoulders, and sat down on the edge of my bed, back to me. "We were there for… bargaining chips, really. We needed something to sell at market to buy more ammo. Necklaces, earrings. Some count's pajamas would have done, even."

“Then how’d you end up in the royal chambers?”

“Mag.” His back muscles tightened under his tank top. “He wanted something… more. He said we’d never have to go without again if we nabbed the crown jewels.” Peter’s voice broke, his gaze tearing towards me, looking me dead in the eye. “He lied to me, Highness. I should have known we were there for more. You don’t bring drugged knives to a theft. You bring them to an assassination.”

What could I say to that? “It’s not your fault for not knowing.”

“It is.” He turned away, and the room grew colder for it. “Mag was going to kill or kidnap all three of you. I had two knives with sedatives on the blades, and he had a gun. What else would we be doing with them? What would we shoot?” His voice broke. “The family pearls?”

“What went wrong?”

“Like I said, Highness. The prince was dead when we arrived.”

I knew. I was there. “I was behind one of the curtains. I hid when Mom walked in. She thought—”

“—that he was you,” Peter finished. “I heard you, you know.” His voice lowered. Began to tremble. “ *That’s not me, Ma, it isn’t. Mom, you killed the wrong twin. You can’t even tell us apart enough to know which one deserves…* ”

“To die.” My hands were shaking. “I shot at her, didn’t I?”

“Like a brother with nothing left to lose.”

“You’re scared of me.”

It was a simple fact. I didn’t know why I hadn’t noticed it before. I’d assumed he was just… disgusted with me. With who I was.

With what I did.

“Peter, I think Mag’s going to drug me.”

“ *What?* ” He whirled around, his movement even jerkier than before. It was wrong, seeing him this way. I’d only known him a few days, but I knew that this wasn’t natural. Not for him. He was the kind of person whose grace wasn’t just skill, but habit. His scramble to my side, his tense yet loose grip on my wrist—none of it was right. He *was*

afraid, but not like prey is afraid of a hunter. More like a cornered predator.

"He's going to slip more of the Venusian Poppy into my food tonight. He kept me sedated all day so I'd be hungry by then. He's going to take me to the palace and… I'm afraid, Peter." I met his eyes. "I'm afraid of him, and even, well. Even a little bit of you."

Peter's face softened, the light in his eyes fading a bit. If I didn't know better, I'd say he seemed disappointed. For all that his knife and words were sharp, there was something gentle in those eyes. "You don't need to be afraid of me, Highness." His hand moved from my wrist to my hand, just barely squeezing it. "You never had to be."

For a moment, time ran slow as a creek in the summertime. The golden light spread over his features, highlighting the deep brown of his hair—I'd thought it was black, before, but his had a shine to it in warm light that was so unlike mine. His nose was proud, his brow knit in thought, and his mouth…

"We'll swap our meals."

"Excuse me?" He shook me out of my reverie. "We'll what?"

"I'll eat your dinner, and you, mine. Mag's too smart to let you pick at your food—or me, for that matter. He'll make sure we're both eating. As long as you stay lucid, and as long as you can fake a drugged-out trance—"

"Oh, believe me, I won't need to fake it in this condition."

"—then, whatever he has in store for you at the palace, you can fight back." Peter's eyes shone with a new determination. "Don't worry about me, Highness. I'm just the gun that shoots Takano at the end of the night. I'm a distraction. A scapegoat. He'll hardly be able to tell I'm not coming."

"I won't let you be a *scapegoat* , Peter," I said. I didn't add, *And I doubt I can get out of this alone.* I didn't add, *I doubt I'll get out alive.*

His hand tightened on mine. "Then let me be a hero. Let me be whatever you need to imagine I am so that you can save yourself and your people."

Looking into those eyes, you couldn't blame me for trying to spare his feelings, even if he was a dirty rotten thief. Not to mention a failed

assassin, a drug distributor, a slumlord and a bit of a pretentious bastard, besides. But when I looked at him, I just got the stupidest ideas in my head. Ideas like, hey, maybe kissing this violent criminal square on the lips is the only thing I want to do with the rest of my brief and useless life. *Maybe* , I find myself musing, *he's not so bad after all.*

Or maybe it was just the drugs.

Yeah, we'll go with that.

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IMPERIAL PALACE: DEN OF CORRUPTION???

We all know, of course, that Minister Takano was bad news from the start. But what if told you, loyal readers, that he orchestrated the distribution of not tens, no, not hundreds, no, but thousands of syringes of Venusian Poppy all throughout Brahma? And not only that, but that he supplied some directly to the kidnappers of our dear Princess? THAT'S RIGHT! THE PRINCESS HAS BEEN KIDNAPPED! Turn to page 34 for the REAL TRUTH, brought to you by the latest addition to our magazine…

"Out of the carriage, there you go. Up you come, Highness, I can't carry you the whole way!" Mag's voice was lilting, but it never got louder than a hiss in my ear. On the one hand, being manhandled by my second-to-least favorite paternally inclined criminal mastermind was not how I wanted to spend the evening. On the other, it was good entertainment to defy him with my imitation of how I felt last time I was coming down from Venusian Poppy.

If I could only forget Peter's face. The shine in his eyes as he watched me and Mag go. As he watched Mag drag me bodily into the transport outside his door, wondering whether it would all be useless. Whether Mag had ensured his uninterrupted victory with two poisoned plates instead of one.

He hadn't, of course. He wasn't enough of a mastermind for that.

He had, unfortunately, thought to cover my face the way any good

Brahmese aristocrat would transport their stolen goods: with a burlap sack over my head. Luckily for me, I knew every back door in the whole of the palace.

Un-luckily for me, that meant I knew where we were headed. The control room, center of New Kinshasa's complex of laser systems that spanned the whole of this godforsaken planet, as well as a convenient secret underground chamber to hide state secrets in. Like a nineteen-year-old drug-addicted heir to the throne, when he was being a bad kid. It was home to the family jewels: the Reactor. Kept the lasers primed… and the island afloat.

I knew from the moment Mag said he wanted New Kinshasa taken down that this was his plan.

Didn't make it any easier to swallow down the tears.

We took every twist and turn the palace allowed for. Misdirection for any constables. Mag may be dressed in his stolen finest, and I may look every inch the drunken prisoner set to entertain some noble for the night. Red wide-leg pants, shirtless, the works. That doesn't mean they couldn't put on their big boy pants and frisk one of us.

I can only hope it'd be Mag.

"Ah, there we are. Keypad? Really?" He does… something to the electronic lock, and the door slides open. Unfortunately for me, there aren't the usual armed guards on the other side of the door.

"Ramses—Takano, since we're in polite company. I see you weren't enough of a coward to break our arrangement."

"What do you think me, some kind of monster? Besides, I'd have to cancel my getaway car, and I hope you know by now that I have expensive tastes."

"Too much of a good thing…" Mag mutters. He shoves me in front of him, twisting my left arm in the process. I'm not quick enough to sneak his gun into my pocket. I'm not Peter.

I am, however, an expert at falling on my face without breaking my nose for the second time. I mumble something incoherent that was absolutely not a comment on Mag's parentage.

"So it's set, then? The child is ready to dispose of the crown while we… take care of business?"

“Oh, yes. Though, have more faith in Peter. He may be young, but he’s sharp.”

Thank god that Takano has never picked up on good sarcasm in his life.

“Then let’s begin.”

Chapter End Notes

tws: allusions to abuse, non-consensual drug use, parental figures yelling at their kids, allusions to non-consensual sex work if you squint.

stay safe!

A Brief Intermission

Chapter Notes

please check the endnotes for this one!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter Nureyev had never been one to wait. If he wanted something, he'd take it. If he drew attention, he'd outrun it. If his feelings, his body, stopped him from doing what was *right,* what *had to be done* — well, he'd tuck them away. It would be years before he'd know the phrase *for future consideration (know them like the back of his hand, like a mantra, like a prayer to a god who stopped listening years ago),* but he lived by them, whether he knew it or not.

So as the sun set, and as the music faded from the streets, and as his body grew numb, Peter Nureyev started walking.

He didn't stop to chatter with the merchants packing up their stalls. He didn't spare a glance at the admirals on leave, their beloveds, locked in tender embraces. He didn't see them at all. His way to the palace would be silent, and secret, and locked firmly out of his own mind.

It wasn't that Peter couldn't feel anything . It was that those feelings were happening to someone else. It might be accurate to say that Peter Ransom had Venusian Poppy coursing through his bloodstream, that Peter Ransom's limbs were heavy with sleep, that Peter Ransom's breath was more even that it had ever been. Peter *Nureyev* was sharp as a knife. Sharp as a fox's teeth.

Peter Nureyev, more than anything, was impatient. Any delays would have to be dealt with. Immediately.

He moved through the palace with an uneven gait—unpredictable. Unplanned, but useful. His veins buzzed with heat. His joints creaked, his ribs ached, his entire body insisting that he rest. He left tracks—long, smeared streaks—of something dark and sticky in his wake. It was messy, through and through. Peter Nureyev did not like messy. Peter Ransom would have to learn to watch where he stepped.

A quick swipe across the neck. Into the chest, and out. All according to plan. Faintly, he saw a few guards rounding the corner. Head. Head. Eye.

Three knives lost. He wouldn't be able to go back for them. Somewhere in his chest, that hurt.

Ah. No, that was the bullet.

So much for staying neat and tidy. He whirled on the guard behind him, slashing across her shoulder so that she twisted right into his other knife. A noise escaped her throat, and she met Ransom's eyes for a moment.

"First rule of thieving, Peter: never linger longer than you have to."

He removed the knife and strode out of the room. Pain shot through the right side of his ribcage. Clutching at it with one hand, he caught himself against the wall and kept walking. Or, staggering.

"Peter Ransom?"

He blinked. "Miss?"

A young woman—a teenager, really—stood before him, staring at the blood seeping through his formerly-white shirt. Her eyes narrowed. "Rita'll do. But you're really him?"

Another blink. "Possibly. I seem to have lost track." He coughed, and the taste of rust filled his mouth. "Apologies."

Satisfied, she pointed further down the hall. "They're in the control room. Your dad's going to sink this whole city, and us with it. Plus, he's going to—"

"My father isn't—" Peter started. "Sink the city?"

"I heard from the maid who did Takano's bedroom that he was talking to your not-your-dad and he's going to kill Princess Steel and it's all going to be on live broadcast soon enough so I'm going to get out of here before we both die and I miss breaking the news, okay? You really should get a move on before you run out of blood." She laughed, then hiccuped. "Doesn't look like there's much left."

He looked down at Ransom's chest *(as long as it remained Ransom's chest and not his it would be safe, he would be safe, he could still save Juno)* , taking in the sight of his forearm now coated in red. "Indeed. Thank you for your… guidance," he slurred. "I'll get right to it."

And so he did. Every step down the long staircase *(hidden behind a*

tapestry, where Juno had tried to disappear to, where Peter had caught him by the collar, tore the gun from his hands, calmed him down the only way he knew how) struck a new hairline crack somewhere in the glassy haze of his body. Soon he was barely upright. Both walls had unsteady lines painted on them in the same deep, dark red as before. Messy, messy, messy.

But he was at the door now. Left ajar. Not like Mag. Must have been Takano. Ramses.

He leaned against the doorframe, rolling Ransom's aching neck towards the opening.

"—And with us is His Highness, Princess Juno Steel. Say hello, Highness."

Juno, bathed in the sickly red light of the Reactor. Juno, hands bound behind his back. Juno, a vacant expression staring at the lens of Takano's camera. Juno, silent. Juno, empty.

For a split second, Peter Nureyev was calm.

Then he wasn't.

White hot rage pulled on him like the strings of a puppet, like his ligaments had been pulled out to turn him into a marionette. His first knife flew wide. The second shot, a lucky break, opening a gash in Takano's arm as he dropped the camera to draw his gun. The third embedded itself in his thigh, bringing him down. *(it went wrong it has been wrong from the start he would never get out of here he would never see Juno again Juno Juno Juno)*

A shot rang out from behind him and Nureyev's left leg exploded with pain, his skeleton shuddering at the change in weight. A voice, from the space beside the door: "Peter, you don't know what you're doing."

A keening cry escaped his lips. He caught his breath and looked up at Mag.

"Why, Mag?"

His mentor's face softened. "Because this planet doesn't need a martyr to change its mind. If it had, this war would have been over a long time ago." His eyes shone with the light of the Reactor. "It needs a saint."

Nureyev's eyes slid to Juno, on the ground. Juno met his eyes, and behind that gaze was a fear and fury he'd seen in no one else before or since. "Peter," he rasped. "Don't be a hero, Peter, please, you need to get out, they've alr—"

The moment he broke eye contact with Juno Steel was the moment something shattered inside him. With the thin veneer of Peter Ransom cracked and crumbled away, Peter Nureyev's solid, steady heart was revealed. It wasn't a fragile thing. Never sensitive, never taking things personally. But beat a loyal beast for long enough and one day you'll have a monster on your hands.

The knife was not carefully placed. It did not slide neatly between the third and fourth rib as Mag had taught him, hand on his. Peter Nureyev was impatient, and he would do anything and everything he could to make sure Mag Ransom never lived to see another day.

Gore painted him head to toe. His breathing was quick. Too quick. His heart (*his too-soft heart, his enduring moral core)* —he could feel it in his throat, his gut, in the crimson knuckles of the fist still grasping his knife—

Chapter End Notes

chapter tws: slight unreality in narration, knife and gun violence, unsanitary amount of blood. this and the following chapter are the reasons i have graphic violence tagged. stay safe yall

Back to the Show

Chapter Notes

please check the endnotes!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Peter? Peter, stay with me. Come on. Come *on,* Peter, I swear! Just wake up. If you just wake *up, please,* Peter, we can get out—” I rolled him over, revealing just how much of the blood on his shirt was his own. “God, Ransom, I told you not to play hero. You didn’t have to—”

A brief moan caught in his throat. He coughed, and coughed again, splattering my chest with more red. So much red. “Not my name.”

“Goddamnit, Ransom, not the time! You’re pumped full of one of the meanest drugs in the solar system, your shirt has more blood in it than you do, we need to get—”

“Nureyev.”

“What?”
A smile twitched across his face. “My name is Peter *Nureyev* . After my father.” Another cough. It sounded… wet. “A good man. A brave —”

I could do nothing but clutch at his shoulders, steadying him through another horrible fit of coughing. What if one of the bullets had caught him in the lungs? What if there was a shot I hadn’t spotted? There was no way I was going to get him out of here alive, not with a punctured lung and a leg more broken than not. “Shh, shh. It’s okay.” Hot tears started to streak down my face. “You are too, Nureyev. You’re brave.” I drew him closer to me, pressing him into my chest. You’re—” My breath hitched. “You’re good. You’re better than anyone, Nureyev.”

“Juno—”

And then the alarms started.

They were screeching, terrible things. I had only heard them once before—

"...little monster. It's not like you don't deserve it."

Anger swells in my chest. Before I know it, I had both hands on my blaster, and both eyes trained on the Empress. "Not another word."

"Juno!" For a moment, her face comes close to the guilt and sorrow she should be feeling. Instead, it narrows into her usual expression: distaste. Disapproval. "So. I suppose I can't trust you to protect your brother after all."

"Not another word." I gulp. "Or I'll shoot." My vision blurs with tears. "I'll shoot you, and I'll keep shooting until I run out of charges. If you say another word—"

"Oh, Juno. Didn't I ever teach you to respect your mother?"
"You're not my mother!"

One, two, three shots. The mirror to her left shatters. Her skirts start to smoke. Her crown falls to the ground, clattering.

"Next one is in your skull, you hear me?"

Her eyes bore into me, a mixture of fear and fury I wish I could forget.

"Do you hear me? Answer me!"

"Highness!"

I tore myself out of my daze and pressed the hand not supporting Peter's weight—the one clutched in my hair—back onto his side wound. Standing in the doorway was some girl with shockingly bright hair and a hardened expression on her face.

"Highness, do you know what those alarms mean?"

I looked at her. Looked down at Peter. Back to her. "Uh, it usually means I'm grounded."

"Exactly!" Taking this as permission, she rushed over to the control panel. "It means we're *all* grounded, Highness, and since *I'm* the only one trying to stop it, we're probably gonna start falling in—"

" *Three minutes,"* announced the speaker in the corner of the room.

"...Huh. Timely." I looked down at Peter. Nureyev. Whoever. No

movement, but he was still breathing. Shallowly. From the looks of it, he might not make it to the ground.

Her fingers flew over the keys. “But not if I can help it!”

“What are you, some kind of freedom fighter?”

“Close! Cyberterrorist! Also, a columnist for Kinshasa Weekly! I convinced my bosses I’d be able to get the exclusive on the Princess’s —on your kidnapping! Didn’t know it’d be quite this exclusive, though.”

Peter’s breath was agonizingly slow. “Listen, whoever you are—”

“Rita!”

“—Rita, it’s too late. They’ve already cut me open and used me to start the descent. Face it: we’re dying today. A horrible, splattery, unavoidable death, that takes thousands of others with us.”

There was a stir from behind me. A low grunt. “Highness?”

“Takano,” I growled. “Still alive, huh?”

I risked a glance over my shoulder. Takano lay in a pool of his own blood, the gun that had been pressed to my head just out of his reach.

“I assume I won’t be for long.” He wheezed. It was almost a laugh. “What with the treason, and all.”

“Not even gonna address the fact that we’re all about to be crushed under the weight of the capital city?”

Another wheeze. “Oh, I knew this would go wrong somehow. Just like everything else I ever made.”

I lifted my hand, sticky with blood, to the gun. “Give me one good reason not to shoot you right now.”

“That we’ll all be dead shortly?”

“Not good enough.” I grabbed it off the floor and tried to level a shot at him, but my hand shook. It was the arm they’d slashed from elbow to wrist to get enough blood out of me to—

“Wait!” Rita threw herself in front of my gun.

“Rita, no!”

“No, *you* no, Highness! I mean, no to you! I mean—he said he *made* it, you can’t shoot the guy who made the thing I’m trying to disable before I’ve figured out how to disable it!”

“…Right.” Pretending I knew what she was talking about, I lowered the gun. Rita swiveled around, words already falling out of her mouth. Satisfied that she and Takano would keep each other busy, I lowered Peter so he lay sprawled across my lap. I set the gun down on the floor.

“ *Two minutes.* ”

I studied his face, committing every feature to memory. High cheekbones, sharp jaw. Hair that used to be sleek, now a dark, tangled halo matted with blood.

“Ransom wanted to worm his way into the palace with these *idealist* methods. Seducing an heir to his cause, or getting rid of the corrupt royal family entirely. He thought the Brahmese people would be swayed by *faith* , of all things. I had to guide him…”

Heavy eyebrows, eyes darker than any I’d ever seen, all serving to make him paler and paler. Blood on the gound, stark against his paper-white hand.

“…so he started sewing chaos for me, peddling the Poppy, and I set myself to take over once the dust cleared. Of course, I needed a failsafe. I always knew I would. Back in the day, when the Empress and I wrote the code for the Angel, I…”

His hand was growing colder. I could hardly make out the difference between his lips and the rest of his face. Only the slow, unsteady beat of his pulse under my hand stopped me from assuming him dead.

“…made sure no one knew it but the two of us. It’s not like I’ll tell a disgraced princess and a self-proclaimed cyberterrorist what it is.”

“Are you sure?”

Takano cried out in pain. “I’m going to die anyway! Why should I tell you?”

“You could have a humane execution. Or, I could keep askin’.”

Another yelp, even more pitiful than the last. “Fine. Fine! There’s a reactivation code. Overrides even the DNA commands. The Empress and I—”

“I know.”

Rita stared at me, face wide and open. “You know?”

“My mom told me. Back when she was… my mom. Before she was the Empress.”

I looked up from where Peter was slipping away under my fingers. Up to the high ceiling of the reactor room, to the chunks of the palace’s foundation falling away to reveal the wiring that keeps New Kinshasa in the sky. Up to the dim, flickering glow of the reactor column itself.

“Remember, when you’re in danger, and I’m not around to help, all you have to do is repeat the spell until you’re safe. The monster won’t get you as long as you remember the words…”

My lips moved without me telling them two. Years of using those words, that *spell* as a mantra. Every time Mick turned up with a broken leg and a story to tell, I’d whisper them to myself as I set it. Every time I’d go down to the kitchens for a snack and Sasha would be sitting, too-quiet, too-still on a stool, I’d mutter them like a prayer that she wouldn’t deck me for asking what’s wrong. Every time Ben—

Ben was never the clever twin. He was kind, and charming, and *sharp,* but not clever. He never learned to hide the mussed hair, the smudged makeup. Or, for that matter, the bruises and chipped teeth. Everyone knew that the royal heirs got into trouble. Benzaiten just wasn’t half as good at concealing what *kind.*

And he could never lie to the Empress.

When Benzaiten was hurt, when he was battered and bruised and broken, that was when I needed the spell most. To remind him that we were okay. To remind me that once upon a time, she was too. And so, with the memory of a thousand muttered phrases in a thousand dark corners, I cast the spell.

“ *Praesidia umbralis infra.* ”

Sasha had been the one to tell me what it meant. *Protect the shadow beneath.* I never knew what the hell that meant.

I guess I would find out.

Chapter End Notes

chapter tws: knife and gun violence, flashbacks to violent abuse, description of severe injuries, what may or may not qualify as torture. stay safe yall

[REDACTED]

Chapter Notes

check endnotes!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

All at once, the alarms quieted. The walls ceased their crumbling. The ground was still.

So was Nureyev.

I grasped for his wrist, digging my thumb into what little flesh was there so hard I couldn't feel anything but my own racing heartbeat. My other hand searched over his neck and chest, hunting for anything that sounded like life. It had hurt, watching his small twists and twitches of pain. But this was so much worse. What if—the bullet. What if it had caught him in the lungs after all? I had to make sure he could breathe.

Faintly, somewhere in the haze of my hearing, in the rushing quiet of my ear pressed to Nureyev's chest— *his heartbeat is barely there and I can't just* —I heard a gunshot. Takano, screaming. Two more. Rita's voice. She repeats herself, over and over, trying to get my attention. To tear me away from Nureyev.

"Highness, please, we need to get out of here. *You* need to get out of here!"

There. A breath. A wet, slow, creaking breath, but it was there. Something slipped out of my mouth that might have been— *can't be, shouldn't be* —Nureyev's name. I kept my head where it was. I had to listen for the next breath. To make sure it came.

"Highness, if you don't snap out of it, I'm going to have to carry you out of here, and I can't lift both of you."

There was a gentle touch on my shoulder. "I don't want to leave him down here."

I shuddered. But as another damp, shivering breath left Nureyev's lips, I pried my hand off his wrist. Gingerly, the hand on my shoulder left me and tucked itself under Nureyev's knees.

“ *No,* ” I hissed.

Rita paused. “No?”

“We don’t know how bad it is.” I hated how high and thin my voice was when I said it. I hated to be right and still be so pathetic. “We can’t move him. What if his *spine*— ” A sob choked its way out of my throat. I pushed it back down again.

The same hand brushed my cheek, cradling it as tears streaked their way down its side. “Highness, we have to.”

I knew we did. I also knew he could die if we lifted him, and it would be my fault. It would be my fault for letting him believe me. My fault for letting him believe *in* me. My goddamn fault for pretending I could ever save him, and doing him the dishonor of being the one to finish him off.

“Please, Highness. We can’t let him get caught.”

That shook me. Turned me right side up again. I couldn’t be the one to let him rot in jail, either. “You’re right. He wouldn’t be—they wouldn’t treat him—”

Rita shushed me gently, wiped the tears out of the corner of my eye with her sweater sleeve, and went to lift Nureyev herself.

“Let me—”

“No.” She was firm. She hefted Nureyev to a sitting position, her arm under his shoulder, and tucked her other hand under his legs. Despite being twice her size, he didn’t seem to weigh her down at all.

“Now go. You’ve got business to finish upstairs.”

I stared at her.

“I’ll get him to the hospital, I promise. My friend’s kid’s babysitter is a nurse, she’ll be all right with anonymous insurgent showing up in the middle of a global emergency, and besides, I need time to spin this so Mister Ransom here is the real hero, not just some alley cat wrapped up in—”

“What business?”

Her expression softened. “Highness, we haven’t saved Brahma. Not yet.” She kicked the gun to my feet. “The Empress…”

I picked up the gun. Only three bullets left. No warning shots this time.

I wonder how the press would spin it tomorrow. Tomorrow, once the fires had been put out and the crews brought in to fix the twisted pipes. “Steel Dynasty Stands Up For Itself!” “Royal Adviser A Traitor!” “New Kinshasa Afloat! Hurrah for the Empire!”

I couldn’t bring myself to wake up to that.

I slid the gun into my front pocket. Leaned down to where Nureyev’s head hung limp. “If you can hear me, Nureyev,” I whispered, my voice breaking with every word, “You’re the greatest thing that ever happened to me. You make me feel like—”

I couldn’t say it. Not when I wasn’t sure he could hear.

I pressed a kiss to his temple. He would know what it meant.

“Go on, then.” I waved at the stairs, my head still bowed. “Get him out of here. Get yourself out of here.”

“Yes, your Highness.”

“And cut the Highness crap. I’m Juno Steel.” I looked up at her. “And I’m about to be the last of my name.”

-

Every step through the servant passageways felt stranger than ever. Sure, I could chalk that up to blood loss, or some sort of severe head trauma from getting dropped on a stone floor with no hands to break my fall, but everything just felt so *different.* I stepped on all the creaky floorboards. I tripped over the loose stair. I wasn’t at home anymore.

I had a nice, long walk to face the fact that I hadn’t been. Not for a long time.

I knew exactly where the Empress would be at this hour. Every newspaper on every streetcorner had told me: “Empress locked away in her quarters! Fate of the crown still unknown!”

It was no surprise that she hadn’t locked the servant entrance. As

wracked with grief as she may or may not have been, she still needed to eat. When you get down to it, a royal's a royal, and they want to be treated like one.

They want to.

Huh. That's a new one.

The door was silent as I slipped it open. In fact, the whole room was silent. There was some kind of smell in the air, something sour and crisp. A cleaner? Whatever it was, it was…

Click. The barrel of a gun, pressed to my temple.

"Juno."

I gritted my teeth. "Mom. Same plan as before, huh? Get rid of all your heirs and ensure you're the bitter end of the Steel Dynasty."

"Don't be stupid, child." She dug the gun in farther. "The *plan* was to get rid of you so you never saw your coronation day."

"Why?" I snarled. "What, I remind you too much of yourself?"

Her hand was shaking. The barrel twitched and jumped. I didn't dare turn to face her—I had already narrowly avoided getting my brains blown out once today, and that was enough for me. Maybe if I could just talk her down, she'd—

The gun clattered to the floor. Empress Sarah Steel knelt right next to it, hands covering her face. "I just wanted what was best for us. For all of us. Takano was going to take me down, take *you* down. He always thought he was so stealthy, betraying me, betraying what the Angel stood for and *gloating* about it in court—"

"The hell do you mean?" I said, using the words to cover the sound of my foot sliding the gun towards me—more importantly, away from *her* .

"You wouldn't have stood a chance," she rasped, meeting my eyes for the first time since that bloody night. "You believed in *good.* In people who stayed good."

"I didn't believe Takano was a good person. Do you think I'm still four years old with dreams of the throne?" I inched away from the door, but I kept myself between her and it. The change of angle left

her backlit against the broken bay window. "'Cause I don't know about you, but as soon as I was old enough to understand the newsreels, those dreams got dashed pretty quick."

"It wouldn't be Takano, you *idiot* ." She heaved what could have been a sigh or a wheeze, depending on how generous you were feeling. "You'd be swayed by some young *revolutionary,* some *idealist* like you. And you'd bring about your own destruction."

I made the conscious choice not to think too hard about that. There would be time later. "So you thought killing me would work quicker?" I lined up the shot at her head, my arm still weak and shivering.

"No," she hissed. "Takano, he… changed his plans. He got impatient. Messy. Started grabbing for power that wasn't his. Or maybe he wanted it that way all along: a disaster. Himself, a savior. But when those bastards waltzed into our *home* like it was *nothing,* when the captain of the guard told me there were two rebels undercover, sneaking around armed to the teeth with stolen weapons and stolen drugs. Well. I did what I had to do."

Her face fell. "Takano must have wanted to be sure. Must have thought that you'd stopped believing in goodness and truth and *love.* That you thought Brahma beyond help."

My breath hitched.

"Did you?"

Sure, I'd gone on maybe a few too many benders. Sure, I'd been spending more time at Mick's than in my own bedroom. And maybe I'd considered life underneath New Kinshasa once or twice. But not enough to warrant drugging, and killing, and—

"Juno—" her voice broke— "You'll never understand. You'll never comprehend what it takes to kill someone. To kill your *family.* Just because they could hurt your people. Do you know the loyalty that takes? The conviction?"

In that moment, with the cool metal of the gun beneath my hand, with my *mother* outlined in the moonlight… I wasn't sure that I did.

But as I went to lower my gun, my gaze flicked to a dark spot on the rug by the room's bed. By *our room's* bed . Faded, yes. Very nearly gone—it must have been the smell I'd caught before. Biting. Fresh. The ache in my ribs twisted, *burned* at seeing nothing but the shadow

of a bloodstain, the memory of a tragedy, the ghost of the past… all where my twin brother should be.

That was enough loyalty for me.

One shot was all it took, in the end. One shot, and a long, long fall out the window.

Chapter End Notes

chapter tws: death (not graphic), threats of gun violence from a parent, political corruption, mention of severe injury, mention of drug abuse. stay safe yall

Breaking the News

Chapter Notes

> art in this chapter by @ladyshakesqueer on tumblr! thanks again to my artists, i couldn't have hauled ass on this project without yall <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

New Kinshasa Herald: *So, Miss Rita, was it?*

Rita, for Kinshasa Weekly: [edited for brevity] Yep!

NKH: *You say you were present when the quake hit?*

R: Sure was! I was hopin' to get a profile on the Empress, just like everyone else [...] I'd been waiting for hours, even through the whole business with the Angel malfunctioning, but that was when I spotted Minister Takano headed up to her rooms!

NKH: *And you say he hadn't been up there long before the gunshot rang out?*

R: [pause] No, he hadn't. It was only a minute or two. The quake stops, and so he comes up the hallway. I see him runnin', gun drawn—he's Director of Defense, see, he's got clearance to wear a gun in the palace, even though seems like we all oughta be these days [...] Then I hear the shot, and then some glass hittin' the floor, and so *I* go runnin'.

NKH: *So the shot came first?*

R: Yeah, I don't care *what* those coroners say up there. Her Imperial Majesty was dead before she hit the ground.

NKH: *None of the security cameras in the palace were operational that night. Do you have anyone to corroborate your story? Any names?*

R: Well, for anyone who knows the princess, his friend Mick Mercury and I go way back, see, cause we both used to work in room service, except now he's tryin' out bein' an apprentice chef [...] and the kitchens are right beneath the Imperial quarters. So he must have heard it all!

NKH: *Was there anyone else in the hall who saw Takano?*

R: Anyone he didn't knife on his way up? I doubt it.

NKH: *Thanks so much for your time, Miss Rita. One last question: how did* you *survive?*

R: That's classified!

-

It was three days before Nureyev was fully lucid. Such were the downsides to street anaesthesia, I guess. It only took two before he was framed for the murder of Jack Takano.

Not that anyone would blame the guy. Not anymore.

The spin Rita was putting on it was that Nureyev had been working closely with the Ministry to monitor Takano, under the cover of Peter Ransom, son of drug kingpin Mag Ransom. (I had argued that kingpin was a bit of a strong word, but no one listens to me.

It's kind of refreshing, honestly.)

Anyway, the timeline the media had picked up was, for the most part, solid. Takano goes to hit the big red self-destruct button on his inadvisably-designed weapons system, then to murder the royal family live on television. It helped that there was a grain of truth to that. After he tries (and, as far as the public is concerned, succeeds) to kill me, he runs upstairs, shoots the Empress in the head, and pushes her out the window. When he realizes his grand plan is falling apart, he runs back down to the control room and gets thoroughly shot to death by Peter Nureyev, hero of New Kinshasa.

That was it. No magic words. No matricide, no patricide, all mess, no fuss. I have to say, it's a bit of a stretch. Anyone who's worked in the palace knows the times don't line up. But only a tiny fraction of Brahma has, and none of them are about to protest a change in government.

The only problem is… Nureyev. Everyone knows his name now. His face. What was so precious moments ago is the talk of the town. I

don't want to be the one to break it to him.

Which is why, when I walked into the clinic for the third time, with its single cot and unfinished wooden walls, I was almost glad to hear the radio playing.

Almost.

"Juno."

The look on his face… it was like a bullet to the chest. Or maybe that's still a bit insensitive to say.

Either way, I stood frozen in the doorframe. "Nureyev."

"You came."

"I've been coming."

I took a step toward him. Faltered. "Do you want me to, uh."

He reached out his hand. I took it.

This close, my hips resting on the edge of the cot, I could see the shadows carved out of his cheeks and eyes. Practically a skull.

"Turn it off?"

I did.

Nureyev sighed. "Thank you. I don't know how to…"

"I don't know either."

He squeezed my hand, still staring at a point on the wall behind me. "Where do we go?"

"Where do you want to go?"

"You—" He chuckled, which turned into a wheeze, which turned into a hacking cough. Without realizing, I leaned down, untangling my hand from his to hold him by the shoulders. He looked up at me, his eyes too-soft. "You can't be serious."

"I have the money. Rita has connections. Her friend seems to have patched you up most of the way." I found his hand again and held it, gentle this time. Every moment of being here, touching him… I mean,

I'd thought about it, yeah. I just didn't think it would be this nice. Desperate, romantic, sure. But not *nice* . "What do you want, Nureyev?"

"Oh, Juno." He stretched upwards, closing the distance between us and pressing a kiss to my temple. "You know, it sounds better. Coming from you."

"Don't flatter me. I'm full of myself, remember?"

"I seem to remember being pretentious, and yet." He gestures with his free hand at his sprawling, sticklike figure, a broken toy tossed on the floor. "Here I am."

"Here we are." I boosted myself onto the cot with him, shuffling him to the side (gently, now). "The question is, where are we going?"

His face was so close to mine that I could feel his breath when he spoke. "The doctor—she's mentioned a coalition."

"Of what?" I shifted so that one arm supported his back against the wall while my other hand was clasped in his, over his chest.

"Criminals. Terrorists, really." He wheezed. "People like us."

"Huh."

"We don't have to." The heat of his breath on my neck. The weight of his chin on my shoulder. It was more than a lady could stand. "If you want to lie low for a while, I can see if I can get myself off-planet long enough to—"

"You idiot." Laughter rolled through me. I was careful not to jostle him. I just couldn't stop myself from shaking, from giggling. "As if I'm ever going to leave you again."

Our eyes met.

"You mean that."

It wasn't a question, but I answered anyway. "Of course."

He tilted his head down, eyes on my lips, forehead pressed to mine. "Can I…?"

It wasn't a question.

I answered it anyway.

-

"Jet Siquliak?"

"The very same." The man in the heavy brown jacket, the only one at the spaceport this early in the morning, grinned at me. At us.

Peter grinned back. "The Unnatural Disaster?"

"Who else?"

Looking at the two of them, there was something in common. Peter's razor-sharp teeth and Siquliak's razor-sharp gaze. Sure, he was some ten or twenty years older than us, but it's not like he looked old. He wasn't dignified like Takano or affable like Mag. He just looked… dangerous.

"So. Juno and Peter." He popped the "p" like bubblegum, every word honed to a point. "Franny told us you two were interested in more… *recreational* pursuits."

Nureyev's hand tightened around my waist. "Not strictly speaking."

"We're just looking to do some good elsewhere, okay?" I snapped. "Anywhere but here."

"Right," Siquliak said, voice heavy with syrupy faux-sweetness. "And the Ruby just happened to be the fastest ride off Brahma."

"Maybe," said Peter. "Or maybe your new contact Aurinko is the only terrorist the doctor mentioned with half a plan of how to end this godforsaken war."

Siquliak took a step forward."And why's a kid like you interested in the war, anyhow?"

Before Peter could start waxing poetic, I interrupted. "Does it matter? You've heard the news. You know what we're capable of."

"Murder doesn't make someone a good criminal. It might make them a good friend, good for a few drinks and a story, but hey." His

razor gaze turned to me. “I’m not here to make friends.”

“Look, big guy. We’re willing to help your people if you’re willing to get us out of here. I’ll even pay.”

Siquliak pursed his lips before looking back at his car. It whistled, low and long. “All right, all right. We’ll give you kids a chance.” The car let out a contented beep. He sighed. “Just don’t get squeamish at the last second, okay? Aurinko and I only just made contact, and there’s something up with her. Her work’s messier than it used to be, and not in the fun way. We’re gonna head to Neptune, hook up with an old friend, see what kind of shit we can throw around.” He looked back at Peter. “And you two are coming along. Don’t fuck it up.”

“Given our track record, I can’t make any promises.”

And I couldn’t. No more promises. No more sure things. No more absolute truths. From here on out, we didn’t have anything tying us down.

Only the two of us, and the strings of fate pulling us toward our uncertain future.

Chapter End Notes

this update is a day late because i decided to release it all at once instead of in pieces! i also struggled in deciding whether or not to write out the kiss. in the end, i decided to give them their privacy, because i don't necessarily want this fic to read as pure romance. i chose to close instead with the two of them running off into the stars together, and i feel like that's more fitting. if you feel otherwise i promise i'll write some kissin' fic someday!

thanks so much to everyone who's commented or left kudos, it means a lot. you're all wonderful! have a great day!

EDIT: for those curious, takano's work is entirely discredited and the guardian angel system of policing is gone for good :]

End Notes

thank you for reading!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!